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**Chanukah:
Chashmonaim's Leadership - Rambam vs. Ramban**
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We are all wondering about leadership these days. Every few weeks a new front runner emerges for the Republican nomination. And as the primaries approach, we need to think carefully about the type of leader that we imagine ought to occupy the White House. In the Jewish community, leadership is also a central feature in conversation. What type of leader do you think the Torah envisions?

As Chanukah approaches, we have the opportunity to drill down to the question of the ideal Jewish leader. The chashmonaim represent a certain type of aggressive religious leadership that sits at the center of a debate between Rambam and Ramban¹. The point of departure for this analysis is the technical question of whether a kohen, a descendant of Aharon, may take a position of Jewish political leadership.

Ramban, in his commentary on Bereishit (49:10) talks about the necessity of keeping Jewish political leadership within the line of Judah. "The rod [of leadership] may not turn away from Judah", says Jacob at the end of his life. The Ramban expounds on this,

"In my opinion, the kings from other tribes, who ruled over Israel after David, went against the wish of their father Jacob by diverting the inheritance of Judah to another tribe...This was also the reason for the punishment of Chashmonaim, who reigned during the Second Temple...It is also possible that [in addition to the Chashmonaim having sinned for assuming royalty when there were not from the tribe of Judah,] they sinned in ruling on account of their being priests...it was not for them to rule, but only to perform the service of God."

Ramban points out two violations. First, they usurped the power from the line of Judah and David; something for which they had no right. Second, they committed a special violation because they are kohanim who were meant "only to perform the service of God."

Rambam in his Code (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Megila v'Channukah 3:1 outlines a very different version of this story.

"In the time of the Second Temple, when the Greeks ruled over Israel, they issued evil decrees against them...And Israel was in sore straits...and suffered great persecution, until the God of our fathers took pity on them, and saved and delivered them from the hands of the Greeks. For the Hasmonean family of high priests won a victory in which they slew the Greeks, and saved Israel from their hands. The set up a king from among the priests, and restored Israel's kingdom for a period of more than two hundred years – until the destruction of the Second Temple."

¹See הררי קדם, חלק א, סימן קנח אות ד

As the Rambam introduces the story of Channukah he emphasizes the positive aspect of having a King from the “family of high priests.” It seems that for the Rambam perhaps the ideal Jewish political leader is also a kohen; a person who is committed to the service of God as well as the service of people.

While there is no doubt a technical debate regarding political leadership from outside of the line of Judah at play between Ramban and Rambam; I believe their debate touches on a more fundamental question regarding the ideal Jewish leader. For the Ramban, the chashmonaim committed a grave sin by combining religious and political leadership. For the Rambam, part of the greatness of the chashmonaim was the very fact that they combined religious and political leadership.

How we think about this question has serious implications for the modern State of Israel and its government. In addition, we might use this model to think about the person we want in the White House. Before you enter into the polling booth take a few minutes to ask yourself what guidance this debate in particular, and Torah-values in general, might have to offer.

To see the sources in full, both Hebrew and English, click through this [link](#).



Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, was the first graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Upon graduation he served as the Rabbi of Kehilat Keshet: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood for seven years. In Rabbi Fox's tenure at Keshet, the community grew three-fold from thirty families to nearly one hundred. During that time Rabbi Fox also taught at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as well as the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Bergen County. He also served on the board of the Synagogue Leadership Initiative of the UJA of NNJ. Rabbi Fox is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and has also been a member of the faculty of the Drisha Institute, the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Westchester County, and Hadar.